

## **Ambassador Paul D. Wohlers**

### **Remarks at State University of Tetovo**

February 27, 2014

#### **Perspectives on Elections: A Level Playing Field**

Good morning Rector Ameti, students, faculty, and staff. Thank you for welcoming me here to the State University of Tetovo. This is my first visit to your university, and it is a pleasure to witness your commitment and dedication to education. You have a strong community, and I hope that you are all proud to be a part of this university family.

Yesterday I attended a number of events to mark the 10th anniversary of the tragic death of President Boris Trajkovski, and those events reminded me of the power of our common experiences and bonds. The people around you can be a source of strength, support, and wisdom, and there are few times in life more important to building these key relationships than your university years. I hope that you all enjoy them and grow, both academically and intellectually.

It is a particular honor to speak to you now, in this year that marks the 20th anniversary of official relations between the United States and the Republic of Macedonia. The partnership our nations have established over the last twenty years continues to grow and develop, bolstered by our common interests and goals, and nurtured by our shared belief in Macedonia's potential to be a strong, prosperous, multi-cultural democracy, fully integrated into the Euro-Atlantic community.

Why do we have this partnership? Put simply, because the United States believes in Macedonia. We value our partnership, and we want to see you succeed. From the establishment of our first liaison office in Skopje in 1993, we have stood by you and worked tirelessly to help Macedonia progress economically and democratically. In that process, we have provided almost \$1 billion in assistance to Macedonia, ranging from economic assistance to military aid to renovating schools and hospitals. We have cheered your successes, and we also have done what good friends should do, recognizing areas in need of greater attention and offering our help in maintaining progress toward our shared goals.

One of those shared goals is fair elections. This is a particularly interesting and exciting time in Macedonia as you move towards elections, but it's important to note that this is also a test, for you, as citizens of Macedonia. The world will be watching as your country prepares for that great experiment of democracy – conducting free, fair, and transparent elections. The right to cast one's vote without pressure or intimidation from any party, in secret, and to have that vote counted is perhaps the core experience of citizenship. I can still remember the thrill of casting my ballot for the first time as an 18-year-old – having the chance to express my opinion by voting for those who I thought were the most qualified to lead my country forward to a better future.

I'm sure we can all agree about the importance of free, fair, and transparent elections, but I'll also point out that a healthy democracy is not just about elections, and elections are not just about casting ballots. In a sense, election campaigns are a form of concentrated democracy – during a relatively brief period of time the democratic principles of a country are put to the test. I believe you can learn a lot about the health of democracy and the fairness of elections by considering two questions:

Do citizens receive the information they need to be able to make an independent, informed choice when they vote?

Do voters make their choices freely, based upon their own assessments and evaluations, without coercion from the state or anyone else?

Or put more simply, is there a level playing field during an election campaign and on election day, creating equal opportunity for all candidates?

Election campaigns are a contest, and democratic election campaigns are a contest of ideas. The contestants, in this case the candidates and political parties, must have an equal chance to present their ideas to the people and be judged and chosen based upon their merits.

As with any contest, the competition must be fair. If one side in a football match, for example, is allowed an extra player or given points before the game begins, the final result of the match could not be considered legitimate. A fair football contest allows both sides to compete on an equal basis, and this is how we know that the winner truly deserves the victory – and in the case of elections, this is how we know that the winner is truly the choice of the people.

So what does this mean for Macedonia, as you prepare for the upcoming elections? When we look at the concentrated democracy of Macedonia's past election campaigns, has there been a level playing field?

ODIHR's report on the 2013 municipal elections contains some encouraging news, as well as areas in need of more work. To begin, ODIHR commended Macedonia for the election's administration, saying, "The 2013 municipal elections were efficiently administered and highly competitive." This is a welcome acknowledgement of Macedonia's administrative capacity, and well-deserved praise.

However, when turning to issues of fairness and equality for all candidates and parties, the report raises some questions. Again, I quote from the ODIHR report: "Partisan media coverage and a blurring of state and party activities did not provide a level playing field for candidates to contest the elections." This is an important conclusion, and I encourage you all to think about what this means. The role of the media and the separation between state and party activities are key indicators of the fairness of elections, and in fact of the strength of democracies in general. A healthy democracy must include an independent media free from external influence and also must maintain clear lines between governmental and political activity. Although these goals are not easy for many democracies, including my own country, to sustain, they should be

more than simply goals – they should be what we strive for every day. And when we are found lacking in these areas, we should examine what has gone wrong and work together with our fellow citizens to fix it.

The ODIHR report provides clear examples of where Macedonia's 2013 elections did not provide a level playing field, with equal opportunity for all candidates. On the role of the media, the report states, "Although the media monitored by the OSCE/ODIHR EOM provided extensive campaign coverage in the news, the public broadcaster and most private broadcasters displayed significant bias in favor of the governing parties." The report notes how the closure of media outlets reduced the number of critical voices in Macedonia, and how an unbalanced advertising environment, characterized by high levels of government advertising spending and unfairly applied advertising discounts, skewed coverage and led to media bias. On the positive side, the report notes that "the public broadcaster allocated free airtime to candidates and created a special program to cover campaign activities," but it also states that "these were broadcast outside of prime time, limiting their potential viewership."

It's important to note that these analyses of the media in Macedonia are not coming from ODIHR alone. I have heard again and again from people across Macedonia, sometimes loudly and sometimes in private, that the media landscape is out of balance. Of course, this is not a new problem in Macedonia, or one connected to any single government. Take a look at the ODIHR report from the 2006 parliamentary elections, and you will find language about broadcasters' failure to allocate proportional airtime, and extensive coverage for parties in the ruling coalition. There may be differences of degree over the years, but the problem with imbalanced media coverage is a longstanding one in Macedonia.

To some extent this is easy to understand. After all, no one wants to be criticized. But as U.S. historian Henry Commager said about America, "If our democracy is to flourish, it must have criticism; if our government is to function it must have dissent." U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt was even more emphatic, arguing that to prevent criticism of the government is actually unpatriotic. One of the essential roles of the media is to examine government actions, as government must be accountable to the people. Media must be free to draw attention to actions and issues, and to criticize where needed. When the media is prevented from doing so through outside pressure, the relationship between the government and the people is thrown out of balance, and the country begins to stray from the ideals of democracy.

In order to ensure a healthy media market essential to a strong democracy, commercial media outlets also should maintain financial independence. Any media outlet that is dependent on government support is not independent in any meaningful sense. To go back to the example of a football game, imagine if referees in a match received their pay from one of the teams. Could you rely upon those referees to make fair calls or judge a fair match? At a minimum, a democratic government needs to be absolutely transparent about its relationship with the media, including, for example, providing information on how it spends taxpayers' money on advertising.

The 2013 ODIHR report also notes problems in maintaining a clear distinction between government activities and party campaigning. Specific examples include the misuse of state resources during the campaign, including posting campaign materials on state property in contravention of the Electoral Code; active campaigning by government officials and ministers, often during official working hours and using government vehicles; and well-publicized announcements of job vacancy notices, increased public benefits, and reconstruction projects during the campaign.

This blurring of government and party activity is something we have experienced for many years in the United States as well, and we created a law to limit the ability of the government in power to use its influence in campaigning. Our law is called the Hatch Act, and it was passed in 1939 in response to concerns about government officials improperly using their positions to exert undue influence. The Hatch Act prohibits federal officials from even attempting to influence political campaigns, whether by offering promises of employment, financial assistance, or any other benefit to solicit contributions or political support. Because of this law, I, as a federal employee, am restricted from actively campaigning for a party during elections. I can have my political preferences, of course, and I can vote for whomever I support, but I cannot speak or act from my position in the federal government in favor of any one candidate or party.

The Hatch Act reminds us that government workers in a democracy are public servants, not political actors. Using national positions to serve the interests of a party undermines public trust and democracy itself. Those who work for the government work for the people, and they must remain focused on the public interest, and not on any party agenda.

Of course the temptation to blur the line between party and state is present in all governments. Those in power usually like to stay in power, and many are no doubt tempted to use all means at their disposal to do so. These impulses are natural and forgivable, as long as they are not acted upon. Keeping them in check is essential to the survival of a democracy, as it means taking responsibility to ensure that the power of the state is not used to set the political playing field off balance.

In the United States in 1938, the media brought misdoings by officials to the attention of the people, which was how we knew that we had a problem with crossed lines between state and party activities. We recognized then that if this was left unchecked, our democratic system of government would be weakened. So we took steps to fix the problem with the Hatch Act. I think it's also important to mention that there had been an earlier effort to address this same problem – more than 100 years before the Hatch Act, the administration of President Thomas Jefferson had issued an executive order clarifying the expectation that federal officials “will not attempt to influence the votes of others nor take part in the business of electioneering.” It may have taken more than 100 years to have a law finally in place, but the lesson I draw from this is that it is never too late to fix a problem.

At its core, democracy exists in the relationship between the government and the governed. Democracy is not an end state. It is an effort and a process, requiring daily recommitment to the ideal – in the words of our President Lincoln – of government of the people, by the people, and for the people. From time to time, all democracies struggle to live up to that ideal – the "for the people" part can get lost if the government in power uses its advantages to stay in power without recognizing the people's right to select their leaders without undue influence. The U.S. is no exception, whether we're talking about 1938 or today. As I've said many times, like all other nations the United States does not always get things right. But we continue to strive for our democratic ideals, to confront our challenges, and to come closer to achieving the goal of our Constitution – of "a more perfect union."

In Macedonia today, you too face challenges – the report on last year's elections indicates that the electoral playing field was not as level as it should have been, and here you are now, about to enter another election cycle. As in any democracy, the measure of its strength is how you, the citizens, will rise to the challenge. This could mean pressing your candidates to acknowledge the important issues raised by ODIHR and other international organizations; to commit to leveling the playing field wherever necessary; and to share with you, the voters, their plans for doing so. For Macedonia's many civil servants, this could mean committing themselves to the concept of public service, and resisting the temptation, or instructions, to use official positions to advance partisan ends. For media owners and editors, this could mean ensuring that their outlets are balanced in providing platforms for a fair contest of ideas – that they invite politicians and commentators with a range of perspectives to make their cases, and make every effort to present the news without bias, in accordance with standards of professional journalism.

Government must serve its citizens, and citizens must not be pressured to serve the interests of the state. As President Jefferson wrote, "The will of the people is the only legitimate foundation of any government, and to protect its free expression should be our first object." The world, and especially those with questions about your democracy, will be watching Macedonia as you go through this campaign and election season. I encourage you all to work for balance, to reject bias, and to advocate for equal opportunity and a level playing field for all. That will make these elections the positive example that Macedonia needs and deserves as it moves into the mainstream of modern democracies. That is our wish for all the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia, regardless of who they vote for, or what organization or party they represent.